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Dramatic Publishing

Nathaniel Hawthorne's

The
Scarlet
Letter

Drama

by

Halsted Welles

The Scarlet Letter

“The use of the Scene Designer as a narrative device is extremely helpful in establishing the presentational style of the piece. Minimal scenery with multiple configurations makes the production affordable. The adaptation is true to Hawthorne, and the arc of the Hester-Dimmesdale-Chillingworth relationship is crystal clear.”

(Dora Myers, Shenendehowa High School West, Clifton Park, N.Y.)

Drama. Adapted by Halsted Welles. Based on the novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne. *Cast: 16m., 10w. (6 children.)* Hawthorne’s masterpiece of character under stress lends itself dramatically to a stage presentation—for we see the men smile knowingly at the scarlet letter on Hester’s breast, and we hear the sneers of the holier-than-thou women as they gossip avidly about her secret! Hester has committed an inexcusable crime and has compounded it and confounded her prosecutors by refusing to name her partner in sin. But the man who allows her to protect him suffers more from pangs of conscience than he would have from public humiliation. The dramatic climax shows us once again the timeless truth that compassion and understanding are forever more powerful than vengeance and cruelty. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: SB6.*

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The Scarlet Letter



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THE SCARLET LETTER

A Full-length Play
by
HALSTED WELLES

From the novel of
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE



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THE SCARLET LETTER

**A Full-length Play
For 16 Men, 10 Women and 6 Children***

CHARACTERS

SCENE DESIGNER	FIVE HOUSEWIVES
MISTRESS HIBBINS	THREE VIRGINS
HESTER PRYNNE	FIVE CHILDREN
CHILLINGWORTH	BEADLE
GOVERNOR BELLINGHAM	JUDGE
JOHN WILSON	GENERAL
ARTHUR DIMMESDALE	JAILER (BRACKETT)
PEARL	BONDSERVANT
FIVE TOWNSMEN	SEAMAN

**INDIAN, MAGISTRATE AND OTHER DIGNITARIES,
BANNER CARRIERS, BUMPKINS**

PLACE: Boston

TIME: Seventeenth Century.

***The cast may be reduced by doubling. See Production Notes.**

NOTE

There are many suggestions for lighting effects, particularly of the sky background. However these are more to suggest the shifts in mood to your actors and it is not necessary to follow them literally.

PRODUCTION NOTES

This looks like a heavy production. But it doesn't have to be heavy. If you let your imagination soar, you can keep your billfold folded. It would be a pity to lose the soul of Hawthorne and early New England because we're locked into materialism.

Hawthorne says that there were thousands of people in the town square. In this script five housewives stand for five hundred. Five townsmen, five children, stand for five hundred. If five is too many for you, use three; if three is too many, use one: one housewife can perfectly well stand for a thousand. Just tell the audience she's a thousand women. They'll take your word.

THE CAST. There are glorious acting parts: Hester, I would say, is protagonist; Dimmesdale, deuteragonist; Chillingworth, tritagonist; the little girl, fourth; and Mistress Hibbins, fifth; and other fascinating cameo parts.

SCENERY. Make it what you will. Have a bare stage and sky, and actors bringing on their chairs to make a jail cell, or a cottage. Or a step ladder for the scaffold in the square. Go for the spirit of Hawthorne and don't be crushed by realism.

COSTUMES. Here again this may or may not be a big production. Do what you can. Do it modern dress if you must. But do it.

Hawthorne is too great to be put down for the want of any material. He should be done in Lincoln Center, in Ken-

ned Center, in every tributary theatre, every college and high school in the country.

This is soul music. Hawthorne's soul, early New England's soul, our soul; let all these sing out together and we will have glorious American soul music. And how about our descendants a hundred years from now? If we get it in the bloodstream, they'll be singing too.

ONE LAST NOTE

You could use the audience for the crowd. When Hester walks from the jail to the scaffold in the town square, let her walk through the audience. Get some of the audience to walk along with her, trail her up on stage, join in calling out to her, become the crowd.

Or do it outdoors on a college campus. Instead of moving scenery, have a moving audience. For instance, you could play a scene on the steps of the chapel, leave the doors open, glimpse Dimmesdale preaching. Or when Hester goes to the forest, let her walk to a big tree, and the audience walks along, watches the forest love scene played under the tree.

The Scarlet Letter is such a rich feast you can serve it up in fifty different ways.

H.W.

PROPERTIES

GENERAL

Skeletal structure consisting of broken beams, patch of wall, slats, door, platform with steps, gallows with noose. Descriptions of this structure will be found at various places, as needed, throughout the play, with suggestions for its use to indicate different locales.

JAIL: A suggestion of prison bars, bench, stool, narrow ledge covered with rags.

HESTER'S COTTAGE: Rocking chair, stool, small table, door, window. Act One: Garments hanging about room (two gowns, man's cape, ruff), pair of embroidered gauntlets on stool, powder-blue gown hanging on door. Act Three: Hester's gray bonnet, embroidery work, needle and thread, etc.

GOVERNOR'S HALL: Section of wall (gray velvet), large ancestral portrait in heavy gilt frame. Table covered with dark green cloth, bench with dark green cloth on back and seat, and carved chair (all to be brought on by townsmen).

CHILLINGWORTH'S ROOM: Table with retorts, distilling apparatus, etc., on it; shelf with bottles, jars, gadgets, bottles of elixir and glass on it; bright patchwork quilt on ledge, stool, straight chair, candelabra (lighted) and some strange-looking weeds on table.

DIMMESDALE'S ROOM: Bookshelf with books, small table, straight chair, small sea chest containing branding iron and short lash with several thongs, clerical garb hanging on door, large book and candle (lighted) on table. Act Three: Sheets of manuscript and fresh paper, pen and inkpot on table.

Other items: Short backless bench, pulpit.

PERSONAL

SCENE DESIGNER: Piece of paper, stool, book.

MISTRESS HIBBINS: Castanets.

HESTER: Baby (early scenes of Act One), embroidery work (needle, thread, etc.), burial robe, brooch.

CHILLINGWORTH: Leather case containing several vials of liquid, hat, basket for herbs.

JOHN WILSON: Lighted lantern.

FOURTH HOUSEWIFE: Scuttle of embers, poker, sewing.

FIFTH HOUSEWIFE: Lash consisting of handle with thongs, sewing.

OTHER HOUSEWIVES: Sewing (Act Three).

BEADLE: Sword, staff of office.

JAILER: Key, cup of water, pipe.

BONDSERVANT: Platter containing loaf of bread, wedge of cheese, knife.

BANNER CARRIERS: Banners for procession.

ACT ONE

SETTING: *Broody space stretching to a broody sky, cloud-streaked, foreboding. Silhouetted against the sky, a skeletal structure rises like an island. A pencil of sunlight pierces the overcast sky, strikes this structure; it looks like something a modern sculptor might have put together: big wooden beams broken off short, jagged, some upright, some cantilevered. There's a little patch of dusty pink wall and a little patch of slats like Venetian blinds. There is a dark door. Above this is a platform with open steps up to it. On the platform is a gallows, a noose dangling. All these skeletal elements are interlocked, angular, anguished, harsh as life.*

AT RISE: **SOUND:** *Cry of seagulls, muted, lonely. A pencil of sunlight strikes DL. The SCENE DESIGNER appears. He is a young man with an open-hearted face, cheerful manner, and he is casually dressed.*

SCENE DESIGNER. *I'm the scene designer. (Glances at the island structure.) This thing turns and moves, and at various angles stands for various things: a door to a jail, or a cell in the jail, or a cottage by the sea. (The seagulls are still softly calling.) Sometimes it's a man's bedroom. The Governor's drawing room. A church. Sometimes it's a great primeval forest with a little mossy dell, a shaft of*

sunlight piercing the green forest roof, a babbling brook running by. (*Glances at structure.*) Can you visualize it? Hmm... I can't, either.

(The lights have been building, the gloom lifting, sunlight spreading.)

SCENE DESIGNER. So now we're in Boston in front of the jail in the year 1650. That's the door from the jail. And that's the scaffold where they put people in stocks. That's the gallows where they hang them. Incidentally, there's a person in our play, Mistress Hibbins, widow of the magistrate, who was hanged in the town square. She isn't hanged in *our* play, but she lived on, and she was really hanged. She was a witch.

(A handsome, elegant lady in her forties, MISTRESS HIBBINS, enters, crossing the stage in a slowly flowing arc. On the whole her costume has about it the Puritan severity of the period, but the large ruff is starched yellow, and she wears some sparkling ornaments, and the materials of her gown, although somber, are elegant. She moves with a sense of upper-class authority, continuing on the arc which is curving behind the island.)

SCENE DESIGNER. Oh, there she is now. Often at night Mistress Hibbins would follow a little path that led into the depths of the forest. Most people believed that she had a rendezvous with Satan, who was called the Dark Man of the Forest. Her relations with him were assumed to be lurid. True or not, she was hanged. Others of her type were stripped to the waist, tied behind a wagon and

whipped daily through the town. Still others were placed prone in a field. Rocks were piled on them slowly until there was a big mound, and they were dead. (*MISTRESS HIBBINS has gone.*) Oh, and another thing. Hawthorne says that on this particular morning there was a throng of people in the square. Imagine, right now, in this square, a crowd of bearded men in sad-colored garments and gray steeple-crowned hats.

(FIVE TOWNSMEN, bearded, in sad-colored garments and steeple-crowned hats, are gathering around the jail.)

SCENE DESIGNER. *You know the period. It's Rembrandt. And instead of five townsmen, imagine five hundred. Also some Spanish sailors. And Indians.*

(FIVE HOUSEWIVES are appearing. They are plainly dressed, dark. Like the men, they group, take positions, freeze.)

SCENE DESIGNER. Look at those housewives—must be over five hundred. And all sorts of kids... Well, so the five hundred men are intermixed with all those women. The bright morning sun shines on broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy cheeks that have ripened on beef and ale in far-off England and have not yet grown thin and pale in the atmosphere of Boston. As Hawthorne says, "There was a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons that would startle us of the present day". ... Of course, he meant *his* present day. Nothing would startle us in *our* present day. (*He gives a nod, goes. The FIVE HOUSEWIVES come*

energetically to life. The FIRST HOUSEWIFE, a hard-featured dame of fifty, barks out.)

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. Good wives, I'll tell you a piece of my mind! It would be for the public behoof, if we women, being of mature age and church members, should have the handling of this Hester Prynne! What think ye, gossips? *(The gossips give barks of agreement.)*

SECOND HOUSEWIFE. If the hussy stood up for judgment before us, she wouldn't come off so easily.

THIRD HOUSEWIFE. The magistrates have been merciful overmuch!

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. They should have put the brand of hot iron on her forehead!

SECOND HOUSEWIFE. She'd have winced at that, I warrant me!

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. But she—she doesn't care that they put a letter on her gown! Why, look you, she can cover it with a shawl, and walk the streets as saucy as ever!

FOURTH HOUSEWIFE. Ah, but cover the marks as she will, the pang of it will always be in her heart.

FIFTH HOUSEWIFE. This woman has brought shame upon us all! She should die on the gallows!

THIRD HOUSEWIFE. Is there not law for it?

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. The magistrates have been too merciful! The hussy should hang! *(Except for the FOURTH HOUSEWIFE, the dames chorus agreement. The cluster of FIVE TOWNSMEN has been standing frozen but listening to the HOUSEWIVES. Now they come to life.)*

FIRST TOWNSMAN. Mercy on us, good wife, is there no virtue in women, save what springs from a fear of the gallows? *(The dames start giving him an argument.)* Hush, now, gossips! The lock is turning in the prison

door. Here comes Mistress Prynne herself! (*They all hush, spread back.*)

(From one side THREE VIRGINS enter, dainty and dear. They stop and look: the prison door is opening. At first we see nothing but darkness inside. Then appears the BEADLE, a grim and grisly character, with a sword by his side and his staff of office in his hand. He has a hard, cruel face. He stops, glances back into the dark doorway. HESTER PRYNNE comes out. She is dressed in a gray gown, severe but made of expensive materials. She has a baby in her arms. The BEADLE puts his hand on her shoulder to lead her along. HESTER repels him, steps out of the doorway, out of the shadow into a shaft of sunlight. Babe in arms, she stands looking at the crowd. She is tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. She has dark and abundant hair. She has a beautiful face, deep black eyes. She is ladylike, has a dignity about her, and a simplicity. She doesn't look bold, but she doesn't look cowed. Her beauty shines forth. Now she moves the baby from her breast and reveals, sewed on her grim gray gown, a scarlet letter "A," made of fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery with fantastic flourishes of gold thread. There is a murmuring among TOWNSMEN and HOUSEWIVES. Everyone is staring at the scarlet letter. MISTRESS HIBBINS reappears, stays in the distance watching HESTER with a faint, Mona Lisa-like smile.)

FOURTH HOUSEWIFE. She has a good skill at her needle, that's certain.

SECOND HOUSEWIFE. Yes, but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it?

FIFTH HOUSEWIFE. It were well if we stripped Madam Hester's gown off her shoulders! (*The HOUSEWIVES cackle with laughter, crowding up closer to HESTER. The BEADLE thumps his staff.*)

BEADLE. Make way in the King's name! Open a passage! I promise that Mistress Prynne shall be set where man, woman, and child may have sight of her from this time till an hour past meridian! (*Holds up his staff.*) Blessings on the righteous Colony of Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged out into the sunshine! Come along, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market place!

(The BEADLE leads off, opening a lane through the crowd. HESTER follows. They start a sort of formal tour of the stage, as if walking from the jail in the side street to the scaffold in the square. As HESTER passes, the THREE VIRGINS look at her with a glow of awe. FIVE CHILDREN come running on, three boys, two girls—ages about seven to twelve. They follow after HESTER laughing, gawking. Some get in front of her, backing away as she comes, staring into her face, pointing at her scarlet letter, not understanding things but, having picked up their parents' attitudes, having their cruel fun. The square is full of movement. The FIVE TOWNSMEN and FIVE HOUSEWIVES group and whisper, re-group and re-whisper, then move ahead, cut behind, gossip a bit—but all in pantomime, sort of a ballet in prose. The lights are changing. The sky and the circumference of things are growing gloomier. The island structure is

growing brighter. The stairs that lead up to the platform come into better view. The BEADLE is heading for the stairs. The girls are racing around HESTER shrieking like little fiends. SOUND: Seagulls screeching piteously. Except for the FOURTH HOUSEWIFE, who is young, sad-faced and gentle, the others take turns hissing in HESTER's face as she passes. Then they scurry on ahead to be ready to hiss again as she passes again. The FIFTH HOUSEWIFE, the ugliest one, has a lash—the handle about a foot and a half long, with a cluster of leather thongs, also about a foot and a half long. She keeps waving this at HESTER, threatening her, screeching.)

FIFTH HOUSEWIFE. Hanged you should be, *hanged!*

THIRD HOUSEWIFE. Let the hussy hang!

SECOND HOUSEWIFE. She goes at night in the forest!
(*Into HESTER's FACE.*) You hussy, you know the Dark Man of the Forest!

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. Is he the father? Is your brat the spawn of Satan?

FIFTH HOUSEWIFE. Hanged she should be! Whipped every day for a year and then hanged!

SECOND HOUSEWIFE. Stripped to the waist and whipped every day for a year!

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. You hussy! You filth!

SECOND HOUSEWIFE. The magistrates were too good to you!

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. Judgment indeed! We'll give you your judgment!

(The walk to the scaffold continues. The throng is quieting, growing sullen. MISTRESS HIBBINS has come to

the foot of the stairs and stands watching HESTER with her quizzical look. HESTER keeps calmly following the BEADLE into that blaze of light that shoots straight down on the scaffold. The BEADLE stops at the stairs. HESTER passes MISTRESS HIBBINS without a glance, climbs to the platform which is a little more than head height. She takes her position, facing the throng. Awe is falling. The CHILDREN hush. The dog stops yapping. Seagulls fade. The TOWNSFOLK stand motionless, frozen in tableau vivant. Suddenly the lights grow dimmer still, except for one pinspot of sunlight that catches HESTER's head. Everything looks eerie, end-of-the-worldish, as if the sun had been eclipsed. SOUND: Far off a church bell is tolling, clanky, nasty and nasal. Then, close, we hear another church bell tolling, deep and reverberating. They aren't tolling at the same tempo; the nasty bell does five to the deep bell's four. The SCENE DESIGNER appears at the dark corner of the stage, talks quietly.)

SCENE DESIGNER. We are now in the town square. Thousands of eyes are on Hester. Thousands of thoughts are racing through her head. (*HESTER lifts her face into the thin shaft of sunlight, talks to herself as if all alone in the world.*)

HESTER. I don't know whether to shriek out, or go mad. I'm so alone. I don't even *hear* them! I don't *see* the throng of people! (*The faint streaks of blue in the burdened sky are growing inflamed.*) I see my home in England. I see my father's face, his bald brow, his white beard. I see my mother's face, anxious with love. I see my own girlish face in a mirror, my eyes wondering...

My childhood comes swarming back. Incidents ... big or little, happy or grave, all seem the same, one as vivid as the other ... I see another man's face, pale, thin, scholar-like. His left shoulder is higher than his right ... I see narrow twisting streets, and tall gray stone houses, a huge cathedral somewhere in Europe. And the scholar walking down those ancient intricate streets, side by side with me.

(She looks down at the baby, seems puzzled, as if doubting its existence. She shifts its position, looks at the scarlet letter, touches it to make sure of its reality. Then she resumes her original position, beautiful, madonna-like. Slowly, almost proudly, she scans the dim faces of that greenish, ghostly throng. As she comes to the far edge a pinspot flicks on R, where she is looking. Two men stand motionless, looking at HESTER. One is an INDIAN in his native garb. The other is CHILLINGWORTH, a white man clad in a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume. He is mature but not old. He has a face of remarkable intelligence, is of smallish stature, gentlemanly deportment. His left shoulder is higher than his right. CHILLINGWORTH can't believe his eyes. He hurries through the motionless, dream-like throng to get a better look at HESTER. The pinspot follows him. She looks down, gives a gasp, crushes her baby against her. The pinspot on her goes out. CHILLINGWORTH turns to the throng, starts moving in among them.)

CHILLINGWORTH. I pray you, good sir, who is this woman? *(No answer. He tries another.)* I pray you, good

sir, who is this woman? (*No answer. He tries another.*)
Why is she set up to public shame?

FIRST TOWNSMAN (*stirring to life*). You must be a stranger, friend, else you would have heard of Mistress Hester Prynne and her evil doings. She has raised a great scandal in Reverend Dimmesdale's church.

CHILLINGWORTH. I am a stranger, and have been a wanderer against my will. (*Slowly, the TOWNSFOLK are stirring to life, turning to listen.*) I have long been held in bonds among heathen-folk, am now brought hither by that Indian to be redeemed. Will it please you, therefore, to tell of this woman's offenses?

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. She has a baby! And she's been away from her husband for two years!

CHILLINGWORTH. And who, I pray, is the father?

FIRST TOWNSMAN. Truly, friend, it must gladden your heart to find yourself in a land where iniquity is punished, as here in our godly New England.

CHILLINGWORTH. How did she fall into this iniquity?

SECOND TOWNSMAN. That woman, sir, was the wife of an Englishman, who dwelt in Amsterdam, whence, he was minded to cross over and cast in his lot with us of the Massachusetts.

CHILLINGWORTH. Well, sir, did he come?

FIRST TOWNSMAN. First he sent his wife before him, remaining himself to look after some necessary affairs.

FIRST HOUSEWIFE. Two years that woman has been a dweller here in Boston, and no tidings have come from her husband.

FIFTH HOUSEWIFE. And his young wife, mind you, left to her own guidance... wheoo!

CHILLINGWORTH. Aha, I conceive it!

FIFTH HOUSEWIFE. Exactly what she did, sir! (*The HOUSEWIVES cackle, VIRGINS giggle, TOWNSMEN chuckle. CHILLINGWORTH turns back to the FIRST TOWNSMAN.*)

CHILLINGWORTH. And who, sir, may the father of the baby be?

FIRST TOWNSMAN. That matter remains a riddle.

THIRD TOWNSMAN. Madam Hester absolutely refuses to speak, and the magistrates have laid their heads together in vain.

FOURTH HOUSEWIFE. Perhaps the guilty one stands looking on this sad spectacle, unknown of man, and forgetting that God sees him.

FIRST TOWNSMAN. Aye, that's the truth and that's the mystery.

CHILLINGWORTH. The husband should come himself to look into the mystery. (*He turns to look up at HESTER. The others turn also. The pinspot hits HESTER's face and the baby. The pinspot on CHILLINGWORTH goes out, leaving him one more motionless figure in the dim, greenish throng.*)

FIRST TOWNSMAN. Our Massachusetts magistracy, be-thinking themselves that this woman is youthful and fair, and doubtless was strongly tempted to her fall, they have not been bold to put into force the extremity of our righteous law.

FIFTH HOUSEWIFE. Death by crushing! Or death by hanging!

FIRST TOWNSMAN. In their great mercy, they have doomed Mistress Prynne to stand three hours on the platform, and then, for the remainder of her life, to wear a mark of shame upon her bosom.